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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 003346

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DHAHRAN SENDS
PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: [SOCI](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAO](#) [KMPI](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: BUILDING CIVIL SOCIETY, ONE DISCUSSION AT A TIME

Classified By: Consul General John Kincannon for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In the past year, Consulate officers have observed increasing numbers of small civil society groups forming in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. Also notable is that many of the groups have started to cooperate and interact with each other in pursuit of larger goals. As an example of the beginnings of grassroots civil society in Saudi Arabia, new cultural forums are creating space for political discourse in the Eastern Province. On Tuesday April 25th, PAO gave a presentation on USG public diplomacy programs to a group of 70 women in Hofuf, the capital of the Al Ahsa Governorate. Questions quickly spread to issues of politics, from the legitimacy of Al Manar Television, to Hamas's victory in the Palestinian elections, and to the status of Saudi women. Although like many others, this forum is loosely organized and held in a private home, organizers consider it an important development in Saudi society. End summary.

CREATING SPACE TO TALK

¶2. (C) "My wife and I set up this forum to give women a chance to get together and express themselves," said Sadeq al Ramadan, the host of the forum. Following the custom of gender segregation, the meetings are only for women, but Mr. Al Ramadan listens from the next room. Since its inception in February 2005, the group has held monthly meetings with different speakers. Attendance ranges from 40 to 100 women, with some coming from as far away as Khobar, a 1 1/2 hour drive. The organizers send out notices by text message, and the audience on April 25th ranged in age from a 3-month old boy (the only male in the room) to sixty-year olds.

¶3. (C) The group, like many other forums, does not call itself political. In reality, however, the group has political discussions about many topics. For this event, PAO was asked to talk about cultural and educational exchanges, but questions dealt with a range of political issues. The group seemed both sophisticated and naive, with the capacity for a power-point presentation in a large sitting room in someone's home.

LEARNING HOW TO QUESTION

¶4. (C) "You don't know how hard it is for a woman to ask a question in this culture," Sadek al Ramadan told PolOff as they listened from the next room. He said that some women are too shy to ask questions directly, and call his wife

later to ask her. During the two-hour event, however, women asked pointed questions that ranged from acceptance of Muslims in the US to the Dubai Ports deal. "What would Americans do if they see me wearing the hijab?" asked one woman. "If America believes in free press, why are you banning Al Manar Television?" asked another. Most women only spoke Arabic. Many took notes during the presentation on USG programs, and were very interested in bringing speakers and events to their community. The group welcomed copies of PD publications such as Muslims in America, e-Journals about women in American history, and the Study in the USA booklets.

GOVERNMENT SUPERVISION

15. (C) The event was opened by one of the organizers, Manal al Khalifa; she started by quoting King Abdullah's statements on the importance of cross-cultural communication and understanding and noting that the most recent National Dialogue session focused on communication with non-Saudis. Sadek Al Ramadan said, "the environment is changing. Five years ago if we had asked people to come listen to an American official, no one would have come. They would have been too afraid."

16. (C) Nonetheless, the government continues to monitor these groups. A regular forum for men in Hofuf run by Sheikh Adel Bokhamseen was closed for three months after a speaker discussed the recent Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) summit. "Someone submitted a report to the Mubahith that said it was about a political topic," Sheikh Bokhamseen said, "so they told me to shut it down." He spent weeks trying to

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convince them that the discussion was not political. "I told them they should thank me, not shut it down, because I was encouraging dialogue, just as King Abdullah had asked. In the end they let me start again, but it is still sensitive." As a result, Sheikh Bokhamseen withdrew an invitation for a USG official to speak to the women's group that his wife runs, feeling it was too much of a risk at this point. (Note: Both Sadek al Ramadan and Sheikh Bokhamseen are Shi'a, under perhaps closer scrutiny and observation than Sunni counterparts. End note.)

17. (C) Comment: These groups use King Abdullah's support for dialogue and cultural understanding to protect their activities from criticism, both official and unofficial. Given the tight control of the extremist religious establishment on the natural places for discussions - the mosques, the schools and the universities - these informal groups are providing space for critical thought and discourse. In the absence of clear government guidelines on civil society and its practice, however, their existence remains precarious. End comment.

(APPROVED: KINCANNON)
GFOELLER